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ABSTRACT

This paper describes classroom activities developed around constructivist learning theories (that is, students are always learning because they are constantly constructing their own personal meanings and reflecting on them) as they are applied to English as a Second Language and remedial English students in a secondary classroom dominated by students from non-Anglo cultures. The paper emphasizes that the core activities of the class include student-selected leisure reading, journal writing by students, fluency charts in which students calculate and plot reading fluency, and vocabulary and spelling tests in which students select, grade, and discuss the tests with each other. Also included in the paper is a discussion of the use of classical music as background for reading and journal-writing activities, and the place of myth and folklore in a class full of students from widely different cultures. Each discussion in the paper of a core activity includes a description of how it fits into the constructivist philosophy, how it is actually implemented, and how students respond. The paper concludes with the argument that constructivism, by building new learning upon prior personal and cultural understanding of the student, can overcome the lack of in-home language and learning nurturing in many of the students's homes. (RS)

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Constructivist Theory Into Practice In a Secondary Linguistic Minority Classroom: Shared Teacher and Student Responsibility For Learning

William V. Waters

Research results on literacy and learning among language minority students consistently reveal the home as the linchpin of school performance. Aside from the obvious physical nurturing, the home provides a set of beginning and continuing conditions: 1) language is learned at parent's knee; 2) reading to children before they enter school creates better readers; 3) self-concept first springs from the home and continues throughout life to be groomed by the home; 4) students benefit from active parent involvement with their education.

As a secondary teacher of language minority students, I take it as fact that most of my students have not been, nor are they currently being language/learning nurtured at home for success in our system of public education. My colleagues, too, know this from reading the research and or from their own experience with language minority students. I have seen teacher "understanding" assume one of two equally harmful points of reference: 1) The student ill-prepared to grasp subject matter at grade level is not the responsibility of the teacher. The home is to blame, tacitly the student, and the teacher settles for outward compliance to classroom regime in place of fostering learning. 2) The teacher acknowledges the home as the source of a student's learning problems. Remediation is applied to the student. Similar tested ability levels are tracked into remedial classes

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where subject matter competency is synonomous with basic skills. The students' strong points, interests and abilities, like the larger issues of adolescence, suffer in the umbrage of "parts"--parts of speech, parts of sentences, parts of mathematical concepts, parts of history, parts of science and biology. Students may learn the parts for a test but seldom learn their application to the whole. Teaching is skill deficit driven.

I share a third point of reference with a small but growing number of teachers. Parents provide their children as best they can physical and cultural nourishment in the home. That a home fails to provide a student the fundamental elements of success in our system of education indicts our system as a failure and not the home. The uniqueness as well as the culture-base of each person needs to be celebrated in the educational process. The discovery of one's self, and one's heritage, should be education's cause and growth into one's potentials its end.

Discovery and growth must begin within the bounds of a student's experience. Students believe they know who they are by the time they reach adolescence. After all, by this time their self-concept has been adjudicated by one to several parental figures, over eighteen different teachers, and a variety of peer groups. Girded in rapidly maturing bodies, the adolescent imperative is to press the set of who they believe they are against the system and the judges which created them. And the system responds by creating manipulative techniques which address adolescent's behavior and not potentials.

In school this means young people working to perfect a current understanding of "self," rather than to be easily persuaded to adopt a new understanding. For example, the poor reader works to confirm and to map the limitations of his or her poor ability to read. A new self-concept as a good reader would require a total reconstruction of the old poor-reader-self in response to a powerful intrinsic motive.

The secondary school teacher with 150 to 180 students, bent upon covering prescribed district curriculum, can do little more than to confirm or help to jell a student's already formed self-concept. The good students become better good students; the poor students become better poor students.

For the past two years I have been teaching English and English as a second language to grades 9-12: two classes per day of advanced ESL (students with approximately a 2,000 to 5,000 word vocabulary) and three classes of remedial English which I have come to understand as, English as a second dialect. All my classes are ethnically rich. Anglos comprise the minority and Hispanics the overwhelming majority in my remedial classes. In my ESL classes, there too, Hispanics form the majority. Chinese, Korean, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Phillipine, Tatian, etc. students form the minority. Last semester a total of 175 students were enrolled in my classes.

I have developed my classroom activities around the constructivist learning theories Professor Poplin discusses at length in her paper. Quintessentially, these theories revolve around the central core of belief in the integrity of the human

mind and spirit: students are always learning because they are constantly constructing their own personal meanings and reflecting upon them. This means students are always learning too in the traditional classroom. Where reductionistic methods of teaching are employed, however, what students learn has little or nothing in common with the teacher's presentation of a curriculum. Constructivists seek to capitalize upon students' natural interests and abilities by merging them with the curriculum.

My part in this discussion is to share with the look of constructivist theory as I practice it in my classroom.

Although I seriously doubt the idea of a "typical" hour in the life of a high school teacher, allow me to rough-sketch one in my classroom. A discussion of the core activities and their ramifications will follow.

Typical Hour

Core Activities

1. The tardy bell rings. I turn on my tape player. The music of a famous composer - Beethoven, Brahms, Liszt, Mozart, Rodrigo, etc - tells students the period has begun.
2. Most have taken their folder from a file box kept in the classroom. Most have taken out their book and are leisure reading. Some are still talking with their friends. One to three minutes after the tardy bell, without my help, everyone is leisure reading.

3. After ten minutes of reading I direct their attention to a writing prompt on the board or assign free writing. If the prompt is difficult or controversial, a few minutes of discussion precedes writing. Ten minutes more of music as they write in their logs.
4. A few minutes to count the number of words written and to plot the information on their fluency charts, then we have the lesson of the day.

Examples of the lesson for the day

1) Paragraph writing
2) Sentence structure
3) Short story/novel
4) Creative essay writing
5) Poetry (writing/enjoyment)
6) Student/teacher reading of student papers
7) Anecdotes by students (related to self-selected vocabulary)
8) Study skills
9) On going projects (e.g., what is it you love best from your first culture that you carry with you into your second?)
10) Spelling and vocabulary test each Friday

Ramifications of Core Activities

Constructivist theories emphasize the role of learner as a creator of personal meanings. Adolescents, like adults, learn by

constructing a point of reference from their own past and current experiences to relate to new learning. If we believe students are always learning, we must also acknowledge and key into their particular interests, as well as developmental tasks around which self-selected learning is focused. To a large extent, tasks, needs and interests among adolescents are similar, and to some extent personal. One of the self-selected tasks of adolescents is to distinguish between the two. I use these self-selected tasks and personal interests in the core activities of my classroom. My students choose to understand about themselves and their environment, I use the curriculum of English to aid them in their quest.

Core Activities

1) Leisure Reading

As a daily activity, the benefit of leisure reading extends beyond the obvious: Students learn by doing. No textbooks are allowed (except for the occasional emergency) and students self-select their books from the classroom library, school/public library or bring them from home. In this self-selection of books I see a grooming of interests taking place: a preference for particular genre or a following of a particular interest.

In the affective domain, leisure reading is a time for students to learn the silent or hidden curriculum of the classroom. The expectation that students read and come to it in a reasonable time and of their own volition is a powerful

precursor to future class time. Our intent is established during leisure reading.

From the clerical standpoint of a teacher's day, ten quiet minutes to take roll, assess student/class mood, ready papers, etc. is a substantial boost. To model, I do keep a book at the ready should I be able to finish my clerical duties before the end of leisure reading.

The Music of The Great Composers and Their Lives

Playing classical music and reading the biographies of the men who created it is a staple of my classroom actvities. Here Cross (1969) is helpful. However, before actually trying classical music on the class, I was concerned it might be too far removed from their experience to be of value. According to the tenets of constructivism, the subject matter or experience presented to an individual must be close enough to his personal experience to form meaning from it. Hard rock, heavy metal, disco, salsa, cumbia, oriental music and the like seemed hardly a point of reference to the classical. I was plesantly surprised.

First of all, music is music. Many students took to the measured, mathematical composition of classical music for its own sake. Several reported in their logs that the music aided their ability to concentrate while leisure reading. Secondly, the music was not as foreign to their experience as they and I first believed. For example, Tchaikovsky's "1812 Overture" was recognized as the music backing a popular breakfast cereal commercial, Barber's "Adagio for Strings" the theme from the

movie "Platoon." And although I don't require memorization of composer to piece, many did so on their own.

Beyond the rather casual exposure during leisure reading, the music provides opportunity for a variety of types of writing: 1) I ask that they listen carefully to the music and write the impressions it creates in their mind's eye - Debussy's "Afternoon of the Faun" evoked a woodland scene for many; for some replete with deer! In this same vein of writing I ask for the character or personality of the composer. Students' blind interpretations of Liszt tender a strong argument that music, indeed, can be a viable and accurate way of seeing. 2) More to the liking of curricular specialists, I'm sure, traditional writing about plot, theme, character, characterization, etc. is possible from a movie based on a composer's life. Amadeus, for instance, incorporates in a familar medium, the man, his music and his time. In addition to a platform for writing, the movie provides fodder for discussion: A historical perspective of mental health, alcoholism, drugs, dress, love, hate, religion and so on. As soon as I gather a bit more nerve and familiarity with the art form myself, I would like to use the music as a path to the presentation of ballet. 3) Reading to the class the biography of great composers provides another type of writing and serves as a springboard into other learning activities. The writing it provides is, for the most part, comparison: Compare the life of Beethoven to that of Mozart; or compare the life of one of the great composers to your own. It is remarkable how many composers, too, hated their formal education.

Reading to the class models the sound of reading without the halt and hitch of the poor reader. After I read a section or two we stop and discuss certain words - meanings, the function of prefix/suffix, frequency of use in every day vocabulary, related words - which also increases receptive vocabulary. So that later a comparison paper may be written, I ask them to take notes (beginning in terms of "Write down five things you would like to be able to tell a friend about the life of _____.") while I read.

Classical music also leads to other types of reading and writing: Classical literature, myths, fairy tales, and folklore. For instance, the stories of "Romeo and Juliet," and "Sleeping Beauty" have been treated by a number of composers.

Myths, Fairytales, Folklore

Myths, fairytales and folklore pair simplicity of language with layered complexity of meaning. I found them to be a powerful teaching tool. I read "Sleeping Beauty" to my classes when I discovered most all my students did not know the story. I predicted my ESL students should not know it; they were reared with their own store of folklore. But my English as a second dialect (ESD) students surprised me. They lacked a simple but fundamental cultural base. Imagine the difference having been told "Wake up sleeping beauty!" knowing and not knowing the story, or having been given a reference to the "troll under the bridge"; "Beauty and the Beast"; "Little Red Riding Hood," "Snow White" and so on.

An important (and difficult) literary idea (to teach) is that a work may be read on several levels. The simplicity of language in, for example, "Sleeping Beauty" cleanly isolates the idea of literal interpretation. Traditional elments of literary works (plot, character, etc.) are easily recognizable. The exciting part comes when we explore the idea of theme - Bruno Bettelheim's book The Uses of Enchantment (1976) I found invaluable - or, when I ask the question, "Can someone really sleep for 100 years?" No? And a discussion of cyrogenetics and the capacity for human beings to give substance to even the most improbable of thoughts follows.

After they were familiar with the genre, I asked my students to collect (if possible orally from family) their own particularly regional myth of tale and to share it with the class. They could write it out in their native language and provide the English translation on another page. We then worked as a class to separate the universal human condition, the tale or myth spoke to, from its cultural expression. Myths, fairy tales, folklore - they're not so simple.

LOGS

The young lady in the corner, at the back of the room, the one with tatoos on her hands, the one who puts on makeup or whispers to her friend whenever I present some particularly exciting aspect of the English language, she writes in her log that she wishes her two-year-old son had a father. She has had to stay home with him quite a bit lately and now she is worried she's missed too much school. None of her five older sisters and

two older brothers have graduated from high school, and at seventeen, because of too many absences, her chances are not looking good either.

A brief note to her encouraging her ambition to graduate, pointing out attendance requirements for graduation, offering some options for an alternate path to a diploma, and discussing the great importance and difficulty of being a mother; our assessment of one another is augmented with understanding. Because they and I exchange cherished values in the logs, my interpretation of my students' classroom behavior is quite different from looking on the face of their actions and manners; likewise their interpretation of mine.

Affective domain aside, the logs play a large curricular role. The notion of teaching higher level thinking skills has been upon the lips of educators of late. Several of my students commented to me at the end of last year that they had never really thought about many of the topics I gave as writing prompts; how very important many of the topics were to them. They were expressing the realization that writing can be functional in their lives as a thinking tool. They discovered writing as a place holder of thought which allows reflection time for the development of new ideas or revision of the old. Vygotsky (1962) points out the process in terms of speech:

> Thought is not merely expressed in words; it comes into being existence through them. Every thought tends to connect with something else to establish a relationship between things... Thought undergoes many

changes as it turns into speech. It does not merely find expression in speech; it finds its reality and form. (pp. 125-126)

Here are some examples of writing prompts I gave my students last year:

1) What is the sound of silence?
2) Write a letter to yourself (the person you will be) three years from now. Explain to your future self why he/she is leading the type of life he/she is leading in the future.
3) A three day project -
   day 1 - What do others seen when you walk by?
   day 2 - How do you see yourself?
   day 3 - Is there a difference between the way you see yourself and the way others see you? Would you rather become the way others see you or have others see you as you see yourself?
4) Reader Response - What is your reaction to the book you are reading? Do you like/dislike the part of the book you are now reading, the characters, the way the author writes, etc? Which character is most/least like you and how? What other book have you read that is similar?

My guidelines for log writing:

1. Write about any topic of your choice during free writing. But if you tell me your parents beat you regularly with a 2x4, I am required by law to fill out a report of child abuse.
2. Anything you write you believe too personal for me to read, fold the page in half, staple it - I won't read it.
3. Spelling and grammar errors are forgiven.

Part of the reason for not worrying about spelling or grammar is to encourage students to write fluently. Until students can consistently write 100-200 words during a ten minute period, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, etc. exist as meaningless islands of information. Form follows fluency.

Fluency Charts

By introducing a chart for my students to plot the number of words they wrote each day during our 10 minute write, increases did follow. Without any pressure from me, many delighted in writing over the 250 word top of the chart. Only a very few students did not reach my goal for them of 100 words during our ten minute write. However, they, too, showed increases.

The set up of the chart is as follows:

Left margin - a scale from 0 to 250 (bottom to top)

Bottom margin - day of the week (accommodates two week period)

I asked for an average of the number of words written during the two week period. This they plotted horizontally with a colored marker. I then asked that they set a new goal for the next two week period (however many more words they thought themselves capable of writing during the 10 minute write) and to transfer the line of that goal to a fresh graph. On the second graph handed in, old goal/average/new goal all indicated in different colors of pens across the peaks and valleys of their individual line graph.

The fluency chart brings into practice several principles of constructivist theory.

1. Learning must be self-regulated, students set their own goals and perform at their own individual standards.
2. The application of mathematical principles to one's own life, not just synthetic school problems.
3. Combining subject areas, e.g., math and English, as in life.
4. The practice of using visual representation (graphs) to one's own problems, making the abstract real.

Without being able to quote figures for substantation, I can say with conviction that use of the graphs boosted student writing dramatically. I filled two bulletin boards with graphs of students who over a two month period showed over 100% increases. Several students averaged over 1,250 words/week in their logs; the most concrete substantiation I can offer is that

I found myself hard pressed to read everything they wrote after I gave them fluency charts.

Vocabulary Tests/Spelling Tests

Research shows vocabulary testing to be an insignificant contributor to vocabulary building; spelling tests are virtually a waste of time according to research or so I heard Steve Krashen say at a workshop the summer before last. Yet, for my full accord with everything Krashen has to say about vocabulary and spelling, each Friday my students take a vocabulary/spelling test.

Part of the reason is student expectation. They understand traditional language learning methods and feel insecure without traditional testing. If they are to meet my expectations, I must strive to meet theirs.

To placate my students (yes, too, the administration), I have my students self-select 7 to 20 words from their leisure reading book. I supply 3x5 cards. On the front they write their selection of words, and on the back the definitions. Partners administer tests to one another. They correct each other's paper using the formula, # of words on the test divided into # correct x 100, and compute a letter grade for spelling and vocabulary by using the traditional grading scale: 90-100 = A 80-89 = B 70-79 = C 60-69 = D 59 - F.

In watching this vocabulary test in action, to my surprise, students were actually learning vocabulary. As I walked around the room I heard conversations about words; discussions and

discoveries about the meanings of words and arguments about their pronounciation. I was wonderfully shocked because my decision to use this type of test had little to do with the learning of vocabulary. The benefits I anticipated were:

1) Increased focus on word meaning during reading
2) Introduction of 3x5 cards as study tools
3) Fundamental understanding of test making/taking/ grading procedure
4) Cross-curricular use of math
5) Increased receptive vocabulary (exposure to from 14 to 40 new words each week)
6) Display of teacher trust
7) Participation in a cooperative activity vs. the normal adversarial climate of spelling/vocabulary testing
8) A platform for partner talk in English
9) Introduction (for many) to the idea that the individual is responsible for his/her own education

Summary of Core Activities

The vocabulary and spelling test, like all the other core activities mentioned here, represent my own attempts as teacher/learner using constructivist theories of education. Rather than to staunch the national flow of interest, abilities and developmental tasks of both teacher and learner, constructivism capitalizes upon these. Thus in laying before you my classroom activities, I expose my personal interests and those

of my students as they flow into the task of language development.

The notion of making of personal meaning, fundamental to constructivism, is the most difficult tenet to convey and to grasp. In practice it means that my classroom, my activities belong to me and my students. They can be replicated only by the extent of another teacher's love of classical music, myth, biography and by another teacher's world view of culture as purveyor of universal human expertise. The faith I have in my students to learn from each other, from me and I from them (faith hard won) is my faith, the look of another constructivist teacher's classroom, teaching the same subjects, may look quite different in form. The fact, however, of tying learning to the personal interests, abilities and developmental tasks of both students and teacher should be visible.

Also, a letting go of paternalistic practices of education should be visible. The construction of personal meanings must be just that, personal. Students must be afforded the respect of one whose personal experiences, expressions and beliefs have value. Students stand not before or beneath a teacher, but students and teachers stand side by side so as to give and take an education, one from the other. Control of the classroom is not the right of the teacher nor of the student, but of learning.

One final note about the core activities: their design is to begin a Whiteheadian "romance" (1929) between student and subject. This is remeditation at its only effective level.

Conclusion

Research results on literacy and learning are undeniable: In the words of Don Holdaway (1984) "Unquestionably, the most efficient learning environments we know are those centered on the conditions of the healthy home, and recent research has been reminding us of that fact with almost cruel clarity" (p. 9). Language minority students, many lacking a "healthy home," know the "cruel clarity" of the research - about half are not prepared for academic survival, let alone success. Dropouts might be counted as most educated, however, for they act upon the wisdom of their teachers, substantiated by research.

What may be questioned from the research is the most effective point of intervention, home or school? With (if my memory serves me) 37% of Anglo students dropping out before finishing their secondary education, the question carries broad-based implications. Of the students left in school, Glasser (1986) cites the figure of 50% as not working. To my reckoning, that leaves between 25-35% of the students beginning school, completing with even a semblance of education.

Therefore, if we intervene into the homes of students to bring about success at school, we are looking at the impossible number of from between 65% to 75% of the homes. Were it possible to effect changes in home environment of each and every student, what message do we bring to each and every home? "There is a single cultural template for success in school and life." Whereas the message delivers current truth of educational practice, the larger, long-term truth of cultural diversity goes

begging. Emulate the dominant culture at the level of family and we, as a total culture, lose the kernel of cultural variety so necessary for adaptation to an ever new and changing world. And, at best the value of emulation is doubtful, for often times it is carried out so poorly that it takes on the ridiculous look of aping.

Cultural environmental systems are just as sensitive and vulnerable to mismanagement as those of the earth. We might take a lesson from natural scientists who have learned not to tamper with the fundamental elements of an environmental system rather to preserve them and to respect them.

Theories of constructivism build new learning upon prior personal and cultural understanding of the student. The old is not razed to make way for the new. For adolescents constructivism can ease narcissistic confirmation of self into the congregation of others away from an act of contrition and turn it into a celebration. Teachers, parents, peers have indelibly stamped a self-concept onto the psyche of high school students during trials of identity. Students think they know who they are by the time they attend high school, and all too often their low self-esteem is accurate within the immediate context of their lives. While acknowledging who they are at present, use of constructivist theories can lead students away from present understanding, toward their options and potentials.

Contrary to the vogue of many teacher education programs, curriculum inservices and required clinical teaching methods, constructivism is a particular philosophical base which empowers

student/teacher learning and not a particular curriculum or methodology. Teaching from this point of reference requires honesty and hard work. Over the past two years, I evaluated myself, my teaching, my students and what we all learned in our classroom. I also asked students to evaluate themselves, me and our learning each semester. From these evaluations I know I have learned to teach the way people actually learn, and I have learned to learn from myself and from my students.

School is the place for effective, positive intervention into the lives of students. But schools now operate to the dissatisfaction of students, teachers, parents, administrators, communities, states and even the nation. From the standpoint of special interest groups, now is the time to unite with one another and with the dominant culture to push for a paradigmatic change in the way our children are being taught. Changes in educational practice are inevitable if the great American experiment is to continue. It is somehow frightening, though, that the new focus of education should take into consideration how people actually learn.

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